

Coach Your Team

Wayne Turk



Many of us have played on an athletic team at some time or another, and while on that team, we had a coach who helped us progress and improve our skills. As a PM, it is part of your job to do something similar for your project team. Coaching employees and mentoring them are related, but they are not the same activities, even though some writers and managers use the terms almost interchangeably.

What is Coaching?

Coaching is “a process that enables learning and development to occur and thus performance to improve,” says Eric Parsloe in *The Manager as Coach and Mentor*. He goes on to say that “to be a successful coach requires a knowledge and understanding of process as well as the variety of styles, skills and techniques that are appropriate to the context in which the coaching takes place.”

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According to Daniel Tobin, author of *Coaching and Mentoring*, “the coach is ... a tutor, observing your work and actions, providing comments on execution, and teaching skills which may be lacking.”

While this article focuses on the PM as coach, there is also the trainer as coach. The trainer can be another team member or a professional trainer. He or she can be a peer or even a subordinate. The duties of a trainer are more limited, though, focusing on a specific skill. So a team member may have multiple trainers at the same time or over a period of time. As PM, your coaching responsibilities are much greater and cover a much broader area.

- Managers coach their people as a part of their job, although a training coach can come from another functional area.
- Coaching takes place within the formal manager-employee or trainer-trainee relationship.
- It usually occurs in the workplace or an environment designated for training.
- The focus of coaching is to develop individuals within their current job—to increase specific skills, knowledge, or understanding they need to fulfill their duties.
- Managers tend to initiate and drive the relationship; this is true even in the trainer-trainee situation.
- The coaching relationship may last a long time; but it is finite, ending when an employee has learned what was being taught—though it can, of course, continue for new skills.
- Managers have wider responsibilities as a coach than others.

Your Coaching Duties

As a manager of any kind, you should always be a coach for your employees. Giving them your time and attention helps each of you understand the other. It helps clearly define the expectations that you have for each person. Adopting coaching as a part of your duties allows you to help other people unlock their potential and enhance their performance. You're helping them learn instead of just feeding them the answers. Your mindset should be to create an environment that fosters learning, independent thinking, increased skills, and the desire to become a better asset to the project and the organization. Your responsibility can be seen as facilitating, paving the way for your people to achieve better results and move up in the organization. Provided that you are not the yelling/screaming kind of coach (think Bobby Knight!), you are also showing respect for their individual capabilities and providing the opportunity for self-development. That's both motivating for the person being coached and rewarding for the coach.

I need to clarify something here. Don't look at coaching as just training someone to do something, like teaching someone to work a spreadsheet or handle a specific piece of software. It may include such specific tasks, but it is much more. Ensuring the incorporation of new skills and knowledge into the person's

work repertoire takes time, practice, and feedback. That is a portion of the coaching aspect of the manager's job. The coach observes and critiques performance and provides feedback on the employee's ongoing development of skills. More on feedback later.

Coaching your people can help them to understand the organization's mission, vision, and goals, as well as the project's. It also can give them a better understanding of the organizational culture. Clear communication and understanding of these things result in employees who feel more connected to the organization. Having a good communications flow makes it easier for managers and employees alike.

Coaching involves asking questions. The intention shouldn't be to embarrass employees, but to help them learn something about the job; to ensure they understand policies; to teach them a problem-solving process; and to help you understand what they know, believe, or need. Asking questions (and truly listening to the answers) may be more challenging than just giving them information, but it results in a better team.

Coaching also involves answering questions. PMs are busy people, but even so, they must make time to respond thoughtfully to a team member's question. There are times when all that is needed is a quick answer; other questions may call for more effort and time to give a response. Brushing off the questions or giving perfunctory answers now may cause us to miss out on valuable information or to create problems that could have been avoided. Remember that providing good information, support, and encouragement is an investment in a better team and improved productivity.

Your final duty as a coach is career development of your people. Managers who take an interest and try to help team members progress have highly motivated and productive teams and usually successful projects. The consequences of not addressing career issues can result in lower productivity, low morale, problems, conflicts, and eventually, turnover. Ask people about their aspirations. Whenever possible, assign them work that fits with their career plan. It won't always be possible, but try.

Feedback: The Essential Element

As a part of coaching, you need to give your people feedback. None of us can improve our work and grow our skills if we don't know what we're doing right and wrong or what is expected of us. Here are a few suggestions on providing feedback. They apply any time, not just for coaching.

- Give feedback on a regular basis and whenever a specific occurrence requires it. If something happens (good or bad) that you want to talk about, give feedback as soon as possible after the event.
- Try to always begin with strengths and what people are doing well before moving on to areas for improvement or growth. People usually do want to know where and what they are doing poorly as well as what they are doing well,



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so don't be afraid of giving negative feedback; just make sure it is appropriate, constructive, and correct and that whenever possible, you combine it with positive comments.

- If a person is underperforming or doing something wrong, be specific, factual, unemotional, and direct your comments at performance. Don't make comments that attack the person, just the performance.
- Make sure that your feedback is relevant to their duties and the areas of growth that you want them to attain. Restrict comments to things that are a part of their job and affect their performance or career development.
- Ask people's opinion, and listen to their views of any problems. Team members can often suggest how to deal with their own performance issues, including how you can be most helpful. They may also have suggestions for other improvements.
- Remember why you're giving feedback: You are coaching people to improve performance and enhance their career development. Keep goals (and corrections) realistic; don't ask for the impossible from your people.
- Follow up and reinforce after the meeting. Recognize and praise improvement, or provide course corrections while praising current efforts.

It's All About the Results

Decreased Turnover

Employee turnover is an expensive proposition, involving search and hiring costs, training costs, and less productivity as new hires come up to speed. Studies by the American Management Association and others report a range between 25 percent and 250 percent of annual salary per exiting employee as the cost of replacement. Good coaching helps prevent expensive turnover. Surveys show that employees remain with organizations when: work is interesting and challenging; they are well-informed about organizational goals; they are recognized for good performance; and opportunities exist for their professional development. For example, a study in 2001 involving some 20,000 exit interviews found that the number one reason people leave jobs is "poor supervisory behavior." And one of the factors in poor supervisory behavior was lack of coaching. Another study from the healthcare industry showed that 54 percent of respondents credited coaching as a significant factor in their satisfaction with the job and a reason that they were staying. Managerial skills such as listening, observing, giving constructive feedback, providing recognition, and

teaching new skills are an integral part of your coaching job and they help prevent turnover.

Improved Morale

Improved morale is another result. Your people know that you care about them, and this motivates them. One study from 1999–2003 showed that 60 percent of employees say they feel ignored or taken for granted. Another later study showed that that 65 percent of respondents cited not "feeling valued" or "insufficient recognition or reward" for leaving previous employer. That is the negative side and shows low morale. Most studies show coaching increases morale.

Higher Productivity

Employees who know their job, understand the organization, and know where they fit, care more and want to do a good job. They want the project and the organization to succeed. Michigan-based Triad Performance Technologies, Inc., studied and evaluated the impact of coaching support on 67 regional and district sales managers within the telecom environment. Positive results were achieved in several key areas, which led to an estimated \$2 million profitability impact from the group receiving the coaching. Here's another example: A recent study cited in the *Public Personnel Management Journal* found that the typical management training program increases a manager's productivity by a respectable 22 percent, but when combined with eight weeks of one-to-one coaching, the manager's productivity skyrocketed to more than 85 percent. Those are impressive statistics.

Success Breeds Success

PMs frequently get rewarded or recognized for task completion more than for coaching, motivating, and developing their people. That is shortsighted on the part of the organization. One measure of success for a manager is the success of the people that work for him or her. Coaching your employees will improve your team and make you a better manager and a more valuable organizational asset. This can only help your career progress as well as theirs.

Turk is an independent management consultant. A retired Air Force lieutenant colonel and defense contractor, and the author of *Common Sense Project Management* (ASQ Press, 2008), he is a frequent contributor to Defense AT&L. The author welcomes comments and questions and can be contacted at rwtturk@aol.com.